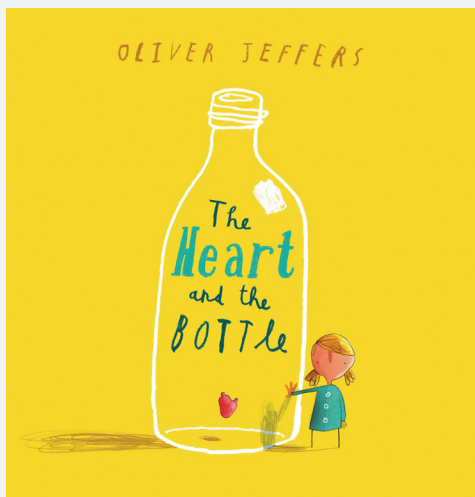


## Second Reaction: Wrestling with *The Heart and the Bottle*

Jeffers, Oliver. *The Heart and the Bottle*. Philomel Books, 2010.

Clara Thiry



I wanted to, I really did. I wanted to read this book, *The Heart in the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers, multiple times to my twenty-three kindergarten students and share it with my empathetic, intelligent, caring colleagues. But I didn't. Instead, I carried it in my bag to and from school for weeks. I read it to myself. I promised myself, "I'll start tomorrow." Why the hemming and hawing, the reluctance? Grief is messy and I have no fear of mess. I am someone who has openly grieved, who continues to grieve. I am not afraid of expressing my sadness and loss. I have had difficult conversations with my students. So why the hesitancy? I finally realized how ill-equipped and fearful I am in guiding my young students in a group discussion about loss, grief, and what is possible on the "other side."

*The Heart and the Bottle* addresses the issue of loss and grief and the aftermath of such an experience. In this book, a young, curious girl ventures into the woods, discovers the world through books, studies the stars, and plays by the seaside, always accompanied by an older man, presumably her grandfather. The illustrations make clear that their relationship is an intimate one. One day she finds him gone. Life changes, becomes unrecognizable, and she decides to protect her heart by placing it in a bottle worn around her neck. Her life becomes less curious and wondrous, but at least her heart is safe. She grows into a woman and it isn't until she is moved by a younger person's curiosity that she decides to release her heart from captivity. With the child's help, the woman's heart is returned to its original spot. Her life becomes full once more.

I have been teaching for twenty-eight years from preschool to fourth grade. I have witnessed many losses in the lives of my students due to incarceration, divorce, deportation, death, and so on. My students and I have also experienced the loss of classmates due to unexpected departures with no chance to say goodbyes. Each of these losses packs their own unique grief punch, but loss is loss, grief is grief. This circles me back to this nagging question: Why do I feel so ill-equipped to discuss such issues with my students? Typically, in my experience, when there has been a loss in the classroom or in the larger community, teachers have been encouraged not to talk about it much. We have been told: "Acknowledge it and move on." "Don't mention it—parents can talk to them at home." "We don't want to frighten the young ones." I agree we don't want to frighten or create hysteria within our students. I have willingly gone along with such advice, while in the back of my mind and heart I have felt it disingenuous. I have been complicit in pushing aside trauma, loss, and grief among my students. This act of turning a blind eye, ear, and heart to the realities of many of my students does not help them learn how to be resilient and persistent in the face of grief. Have I inadvertently isolated my grieving students?

My intentions with this book did not match what actually happened. I did read this book one time to my kindergarten students. Since the illustrations carry much of the story, I put the book under the document camera. I read the book through one time without stopping to talk. There was an audible gasp when it was obvious the man was gone—my students were definitely engaged. One of the powerful elements of this book is how the reader is not told exactly who the man is and what exactly happens to him. It was in these areas of ambiguity that my students were able to begin having interesting conversations. Students turned and talked to their partners about who they thought the man was to the girl and what had happened to him. It was clear to them that regardless of who he was and what happened to him, he was gone and the young girl was sad. They began making connections to their own lives about who they had lost. I was inspired and I felt good about our work thus far.

We turned back to the text, and that is when the conversation derailed. My students became fixated on the heart in the bottle. As is typical for young children, they were thinking very literally and I was not prepared for how to get them to think more symbolically. Some of the questions they posed were: "How did she get her heart out?" "Why isn't SHE dead without her heart?" "How did that other girl get it out?" This is where the book becomes difficult for young children, and perhaps this is when I would explicitly teach how authors use symbols and metaphors as part of their craft. This would be an excellent read for older students who can more easily articulate their understanding of symbolism.

*The Heart and the Bottle* is well-written and beautifully illustrated; however, I would not suggest this as a first text in addressing loss with young children. The use of symbolism can be distracting and difficult for young children to understand. With that said, I will revisit it with my students. In future readings, I will explicitly teach grief as a vocabulary word and expose students to the use of symbolism as part of a writer's craft. I would like to give students opportunities

through discussions, writings, and artwork to share times when they have experienced loss and how they handled their grief. It is my hope that as a result of rereading *The Heart and the Bottle* and discussing our own experiences, my students will gain empathy for others as well as insight into their own grief processes.

### **About the Author**

**Clara Thiry** is in her twenty-eighth year of teaching and currently teaches kindergarten in a southeast Michigan public school. She still finds her work a challenging and joyful privilege as she engages with young minds. She and her students are working together to make the world a better place for all.